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Federal judge invites states to discuss opioid crisis

By ANDREW WELSH-HUGGINS

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COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — A federal judge who's overseeing lawsuits from around the country against the pharmaceutical industry has invited state attorneys general to join discussions and provide input.

Judge Dan Polster in Cleveland is overseeing a consolidated case involving dozens of suits filed by communities against drugmakers and drug distributors.

Polster told The Associated Press Thursday he invited representatives this week from two groups of attorneys general to attend a hearing later this month.

One group, represented by Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine, has filed its own lawsuits over fallout from the opioid epidemic.



A second, bigger group has joined a multistate investigation of the industry.

“It’s clear that any resolution has to be a global one and needs to include the states, and lawsuits that have been filed and lawsuits that are contemplated,” Polster told the AP.

The judge said in courtroom comments Tuesday he’d like some kind of action to resolve the lawsuits this year.

DeWine, a Republican candidate for governor, plans to focus his remarks to the judge on the impact of the epidemic on the state. He didn’t say whether Ohio would consider joining the cases before Polster.

The opioid epidemic has hit the state hard, with a record 4,050 overdose deaths in 2016, a number expected to climb again in 2017. Many of those deaths involve heroin or even deadlier synthetic opioids like fentanyl.

Increased reliance on naloxone, an antidote drug used to revive overdose victims, has strained the budgets of many communities. The state foster care system also says the number of children in custody because of their parents’ drug use is soaring.

“I would hope to be able to present to him what we see is going on in Ohio, where we think the damages have occurred and are continuing to occur,” DeWine said.

DeWine sued five drugmakers last year, accusing the companies of perpetrating the state’s addictions epidemic by intentionally

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Twelve other states have filed similar lawsuits which are separate from those before Polster, which are generally lawsuits brought by cities or counties against drugmakers and drug distributors.

The other twelve states, according to DeWine's office, are: Alaska, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Washington state.

This story has been corrected to show Ohio reported record overdose deaths in 2016, not last year.

Andrew Welsh-Huggins can be reached on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/awhcolumbus>.

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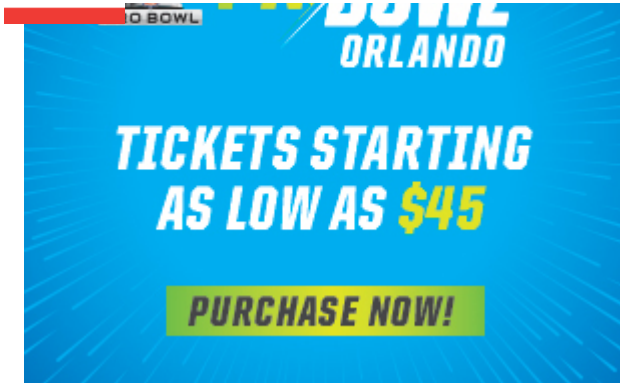
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